



About STDs: Most Common Questions

1. *What Are STDs?*

Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are spread through sexual contact. Sexual contact includes vaginal, anal, or oral intercourse, as well as skin-to-skin contact with sexual organs (penis, vagina, anus, and mouth). Sexually transmitted diseases can also be spread from a pregnant woman to her child. There are more than 25 STDs. The most common STDs in America are: **Chlamydia, gonorrhea, bacterial vaginosis, syphilis, HIV/AIDS, genital warts** (caused by a virus called human papillomavirus—HPV), **hepatitis B, trichomoniasis, pubic lice, scabies, and herpes.**

2. *How Are STDs Transmitted?*

Some STDs (syphilis, Chlamydia, gonorrhea, bacterial vaginosis, HIV) are transmitted by body secretions such as semen, blood, and vaginal fluids. Because of this, when sex toys are used and shared, there is a risk of spreading STDs. Although the risk is relatively low, the first documented case of the spread of HIV through the use of sex toys was reported in 2003.

Other STDs, such as herpes or HPV (the virus causing genital warts), can be transmitted via skin-to-skin contact. Pubic lice and scabies are associated with close body contact, not necessarily sexual contact. It's possible to become infected with pubic lice or scabies as a result of contact with infested clothes, sheets, or towels.

3. *What Are the Symptoms of STDs?*

It is important to remember that some STDs cause no symptoms, and when symptoms do occur, they are often not recognized. Most people with STDs have no symptoms. You can be infected and infect someone else without knowing it. However, there are some common signs to watch for. The symptoms listed below are tricky. They can show up anywhere from 2 days to a couple of months after initial exposure to the disease. Sometimes, symptoms can show up as long as several years after the initial STD infection.

If you have any of these symptoms or think you have been exposed to an STD, contact a healthcare provider immediately. Specific symptoms might include:

- Bumps or blisters near the mouth or genitals;
- Burning or pain during urination or a bowel movement;
- Flu-like symptoms, including fever, chills, and aches;
- Swelling in the groin area.

Symptoms specific to women are:

- Unusual pain or discharge from the vagina;
- Pelvic pain;
- Unusual vaginal bleeding;
- Pain during intercourse;
- Increased severity of menstrual cramps or menstrual abnormalities (like a change in the amount of flow).

Symptoms specific to men:

- Discharge from the penis;
- Testicular pain;
- Pain during urination.

4. *How Are STDs Prevented?*

Not having sex is the best protection against Chlamydia and other STDs. Having sex with only one uninfected partner who only has sex with you is also safe.

For sexually active people, using condoms (or other latex barriers) properly 100 percent of the time when they have vaginal, anal and oral sex is a proven way of reducing risk. But this will not prevent bacterial STDs 100 percent of the time.

Other STDs like genital herpes and HPV/genital warts are transmitted primarily through skin-to-skin contact from sores or ulcers, or even infected skin or mucosal surfaces and fluids that look normal. Syphilis can also be transmitted this way, as well as through body fluids. These STDs can be passed even when no sores, warts, or other symptoms are present. Often, sores, warts, or lesions are very hard to see. Infected areas can be in genital areas that are covered or protected by a latex condom, but they can also occur in areas that are not covered or protected.

Latex condoms used correctly all of the time can reduce the risk of these STDs **only** when the infected areas are covered or protected by the condom. The effectiveness of condoms in

protecting against STDs depends on the location of the sore or lesion. If these sores are present on a part of the genital area that is not covered by a condom, STD transmission can occur.

5. *How Are STDs Treated?*

There are two categories of STDs. Bacterial STDs are caused by bacteria, and viral STDs are caused by viruses. As a result of being caused by different microorganisms, bacterial and viral STDs vary in their treatment.

Bacterial STDs, such as gonorrhea, syphilis, bacterial vaginosis, and Chlamydia, are cured with antibiotics. There is a preventative vaccine for the most common strains of HPV or genital warts. Currently, this vaccine is recommended only for young women 26 years old and younger. Also there are preventative hepatitis vaccines recommended for both male and female children. However, some viral STDs such as HIV and herpes have no cure, but their symptoms can be reduced with treatment.

6. *How Can STDs Affect Me Long Term?*

Several STDs in addition to HIV/AIDS are quite serious. Diseases like syphilis, gonorrhea, and Chlamydia can have long-term consequences, including pelvic inflammatory disease, which can lead to sterility (losing the ability to get pregnant or to get someone pregnant) and chronic pelvic pain. Human papillomavirus (HPV), the virus that causes genital warts, is strongly linked to the development of cervical, throat, anal and penile cancers. STD infection during pregnancy can cause pregnancy complications and, in some cases, lead to illness or death in the newborn.

7. *How Can I Avoid Getting an STD?*

No method except abstinence (no oral, vaginal, or anal sex) is 100 percent effective. Being in a long-term, mutually monogamous relationship (both you and your partner are only having sex with each other) with an uninfected person, can also be a means of avoiding an STD.

8. *How Can I Reduce My Risk of Getting an STD?*

According the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), all partners should get tested for HIV and other STDs before initiating sexual intercourse. However, if you decide to be

sexually active with a partner whose infection status is unknown or who is infected with HIV or another STD, you can reduce your risk of getting an STD by:

- **Asking a new sex partner if he or she has an STD, has been exposed to one, or has any unexplained physical symptoms. Do not have unprotected sex if your partner has signs or symptoms of STDs, such as sores, rashes, or discharge from the genital area.** Many common STDs have no symptoms but can still be transmitted to a sexual partner. If your partner has had sexual relations with someone else recently, he or she may have an STD, even if there are no symptoms.
- **Using a new condom for each act of insertive intercourse.** More and more people are using condoms. Research shows that latex condoms, when *always* used and used *correctly*, are highly effective in preventing the transmission of HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. In addition, correct and consistent use of latex condoms can reduce the risk of other STDs such as Chlamydia, gonorrhea and trichomoniasis. One of the problems with condoms is that many people use them incorrectly or only use them some of the time.
- **Getting regular checkups for STDs (even if you show no symptoms), and learning the common symptoms.** Most STDs are readily treated, and the earlier treatment is sought and sex partners are notified, the less likely the disease will do severe and/or permanent damage.

9. *If a Person Has No Symptoms, Can He or She Still Transmit an STD?*

People can be unaware they are infected with an STD for years. During that time, even though they show no symptoms, the STD can cause damage to their organs and tissues, and they can transmit the STD to their partners. This is why it is a good decision to wait to have sex or to protect yourself every time you do decide to have sex.

All pregnant women should be tested for STDs in their first and third trimesters to ensure their child does not become infected and/or can be treated appropriately. Chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis, trichomoniasis, and bacterial vaginosis (BV) can be treated and cured with antibiotics during pregnancy. There is no cure for viral STDs, such as genital herpes and HIV, but antiviral medication may be appropriate for pregnant women with herpes and definitely is for those with HIV. For women who have active genital herpes lesions at the time of delivery, a Cesarean delivery (C-section) may be performed to protect the newborn against infection. A Cesarean section is also an option for some HIV-infected women. Women who test negative for hepatitis B may receive the hepatitis B vaccine during pregnancy.

10. *What Should I Do if I Think I Have an STD?*

If you think you may have an STD or have been sexually exposed to an individual with an STD, see a health care provider as soon as possible. You can visit your city/county health department, hospital, physician, or health care clinic. If you are a minor (under the age of 18) in the state of Tennessee, and according to State Statute T.C.A. 68-10-104(c), **“Any state, district, county or municipal health officer or any physician may examine, diagnose and treat minors infected with STDs without the knowledge or consent of the parents of the minors, and shall incur no civil or criminal liability in connection with the examination, diagnosis or treatment, except for negligence.”**

The presence of an STD can weaken your immune system and make you more susceptible to more infections, including HIV. The sooner you seek medical care, the sooner you can treat the infection, and the healthier you will be.

Other Informational Links:

American Social Health Association

<http://www.ashastd.org/>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

<http://www.cdc.gov/STD/>

E-Cards, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

<http://www2c.cdc.gov/ecards/index.asp?category=174>

Get Yourself Tested

<http://www.gytnow.org/>

National Institute of Health Medline

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/sexuallytransmitteddiseases.html>

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

<http://www.womenshealth.gov/fag/sexually-transmitted-infections.cfm>

World Health Organization

http://www.who.int/topics/sexually_transmitted_infections/en/